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SUBJECT: CHRISTMAS 2005 IN SOUTHERN VIETNAM

REF: A) HCMC 1310, B) HCMC 1182

1. (SBU) Summary: ConGen contacts in the Catholic and Protestant communities report that, barring a handful of exceptions, Christmas services in all Central Highland provinces and elsewhere in southern and central Vietnam were held without any government interruption despite increased police and military presence prior to the holiday. The GVN's concern that ethnic minority separatists would use Christmas to stage anti-GVN protests reportedly resulted in the arrest of some suspected "Dega Protestants" in the Central Highlands before Christmas, but in no other disruptions to the religious celebrations (ref A). On the eve of Christmas, the GVN announced approval for the legalization of the first two previously unrecognized churches under Vietnam's new legal framework on religion. These developments reflect the GVN's strategy of promoting non-threatening religious groups as alternatives for the "Dega Church", which the GVN believes has separatist aspirations. End summary.

Peaceful Celebrations

2. (SBU) Catholic officials said Christmas services were packed throughout the Central Highlands and elsewhere in southern and central Vietnam with no incidents reported. Our contacts from the Kon Tum diocese (which covers Gia Lai and Kon Tum provinces) said the diocese secured permission to hold additional services in 51 temporary locations in Gia Lai and 4 in Kon Tum, but still could not meet parishioner demand. In Dak Lak and Dak Nong, Catholic services were also held without impediment.

3. (SBU) The GVN-recognized Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam (SECV) told us its congregations were able to observe Christmas throughout the Central Highlands without police interference although police scrutiny had reportedly increased before the holidays. In Gia Lai province, the SECV held services for more than 75,000 - mostly Montagnard - followers. Our SECV contact in Gia Lai told us that SECV Christmas services were held at all of its 29 recognized churches and at over 250 other "meeting points." In Kon Tum province, the SECV was allowed to hold Christmas services in all of its 13 "meeting points."

4. (SBU) In Dak Lak province, despite stepped-up security in the run-up to the holiday, local officials permitted the SECV to hold services at the five churches and 11 "meeting points" that have been officially recognized. A provincial SECV leader said that the organization was also allowed to hold Christmas services at most of its 300 other unrecognized "meeting points." The exceptions were those congregations who did not apply for permission in advance to hold church services, and were therefore instructed to celebrate privately. The Dak Lak SECV representative added that provincial authorities were considering recognizing in 2006 another six meeting points that have been "operating stably." In Dak Nong province, the SECV was allowed to hold Christmas services at all of its recognized and unrecognized "meeting points". A provincial SECV leader there said that, in addition to the one church that has been recognized to date, the authorities are considering recognizing in 2006 four out of 122 "meeting points" in the province.

5. (SBU) Protestant house church leaders told us they heard few reports of serious police harassment at the thousands of house church Christmas services in the southern, central and Central Highland provinces of Vietnam. According to a close contact in the house church community, a local police official informed him before Christmas that house churches in HCMC would be allowed to hold Christmas celebrations in hotels or restaurants provided they gave local authorities advance notice of their celebration. (Note: According to the current regulations, religious activities are only allowed to take place within registered religious premises. End Note.) Our contact also noted that three days before Christmas the GVN approved the applications to legalize the HCMC operations of the Grace Baptist Church (also known as the Vietnam Southern Baptist Convention) and the Seventh Day Adventist Church. These were the first two previously unrecognized churches successfully registered under the new legal framework on religion (reftel B).

But Some Problems Remained

6. (SBU) The exceptions to general reports of unimpeded Christmas celebrations are a handful of cases of police attempts to prevent or interrupt Christmas celebrations, especially at unrecognized house churches. House church contacts reported

about a dozen incidents scattered throughout southern, central and Central Highland regions in Can Tho City, and Binh Dinh, Dak Nong, Kon Tum, Binh Phuoc, Long An and Vinh Long provinces. In most cases, when church leaders contacted central-level MPS officials requesting intervention, local officials backed off and celebrations eventually resumed.

17. (SBU) A reliable contact in the SECV told us that, in a meeting to congratulate the SECV on Christmas, Gia Lai provincial authorities informed the organization of the existence of "an overseas reactionary organization" called the "Dega Movement" or "Dega Church". The authorities said an alleged Dega plot to cause disturbances in the Central Highlands during Christmas resulted in the arrest of a number of people suspected of involvement with the movement. Separately, the Montagnard Foundation posted on its website a list of 27 Dega Protestants allegedly arrested in this roundup, but our contacts have not been able to confirm any of these cases. Our contacts have also not been able to confirm if there was any interference by police in the Christmas services of Protestant groups suspected of being sympathetic to the "Dega Church" and ethnic minority separatism. Post will continue to monitor the situation.

18. (SBU) Comment: SECV and Protestant house church leaders agreed that the GVN showed greater openness and tolerance towards their Christmas celebrations this year than in the past. The remaining cases of police harassment were not concentrated in any particular area, such as the Central Highlands, but scattered throughout various provinces in southern and central Vietnam. This bears out the religious community's concern that the new legal framework on religion may be implemented inconsistently at different levels of government and in different provinces. The long-awaited successful registration of the first two previously unrecognized churches under Vietnam's new legal framework on religion is an important step as these applications are considered test cases for both the GVN, in ironing out bureaucratic procedures, and for unrecognized churches, in testing the sincerity of the GVN to liberalize its religious policy. These developments further reflect the GVN's two-track strategy of promoting non-threatening religious groups while continuing to suppress the "Dega Movement." End Comment.

WINNICK